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MARXIST ALLEGORY IN
JACK LONDON'S ALASKAN TALES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by

Amy Elizabeth Tavidian

August 1990

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Marxist Allegory in
Jack London's Alaskan Tales

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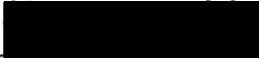
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ABSTRACT

Most of Jack London's critics dismiss his slew of short stories as "meal tickets"; London himself once conceded, 'I loathe the stuff when I have done it. I do it because I want money and it is an easy way to get it.' Yet, James McClintock, in White Logic, conducts a chronological, thematic analysis of Jack London's short stories. He charts London's stories as a progression of man's relation to the world around him: "themes of mastery, to themes of accommodation, to themes of failure." McClintock's analysis culminates in a psychoanalytical reading of these themes where he reveals several Oedipal archetypes. While McClintock examines the psychological level of the symbolism in London's style, there exists another level of symbolic interpretation.

As an active socialist, London, in his major works and essays, often assailed capitalism for its effects on society. The bulk of his short stories, though, centers on man's struggle against nature. A Marxist interpretation of these "naturalistic" tales, however, unfolds a complex allegorical pattern. London employs allegory as a rhetorical component to present a derisive view of the readers' capitalistic culture. The basic precept of Marxist literary criticism considers all literature a social product which reflects the society's superstructure. The author, as producer, is susceptible to the pressures inherent in his

society, and hence, often unknowingly, he creates a literary product that mirrors the problems of society.

Many of Jack London's short stories and "nature" tales should be interpreted as Marxist allegories: underneath man's struggle to combat the cruel harsh elements of nature lies his struggle to compete in a deadly capitalist society. For instance, in "To Build a Fire," a nameless man and his dog travel across deadly Alaskan terrain: man, dog, and cold terrain represent the oppressor, oppressed, and society. The animosity between the man and dog, two representative classes, is the foundation for their relationship, as is often the case between opposing classes. London explains, "There was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was toil slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whiplash and of harsh menacing throat sounds that threatened the whiplash." London's intense description illustrates to the Marxist interpreter the relationship between the worker enduring brutality in exchange for survival and the employer exploiting and threatening his worker in an attempt to achieve social status. Thus, many of London's short stories, from a Marxist perspective, reveal a similar rhetorical stance; while London's literal content may involve man against nature motifs, a critic's examination of his use of allegory reveals his political intent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude to all who keep together the common human bond--you know who you are.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE.....	i
SIGNATURE PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION: TO BUILD AN ARGUMENT.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE EARLY WORKS: COMRADES OF THE COLD.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: BREAKING THE ICE.....	26
CHAPTER THREE: THE FINAL FREEZE.....	39
CONCLUSION: NO GETTING THROUGH.....	59
WORKS CITED.....	64

INTRODUCTION
TO BUILD AN ARGUMENT

Among the early twentieth-century American realist and naturalist writers, Jack London tends to be overlooked, and the few critics who have pursued his work extensively gloss quickly over the plethora of short stories. London's "serious literature," like *Iron Heel*, *Martin Eden*, *John Barceloyna*, gathers interpretive support from his numerous Socialist essays and his active participation in the Socialist Party. London's critics leave the "nature" tales on dusty bookshelves in little boys' rooms. *White Logic* by James McClintock is virtually the only comprehensive criticism available on London's short stories.

Surprisingly, McClintock makes no reference to London's politics until his discussion of the later "socialist stories," two thirds of the way through his text. Indeed, McClintock asserts, boldly, if not narrowly, "his socialism sponsored very few stories of artistic distinction" (123).

Had McClintock moved beyond his own Jungian reading of London's tales, and had he taken instead the perspective of the writer he studies, he might have come to the opposite conclusion: London's socialism "sponsored" the ground work for his greatest short works, his tales of the Klondike. London presents his later "socialist tales" in the form of blatant, pedantic allegory, figuratively beating the reader over the head with his socialist argument. Yet these

definitively inferior allegories emerge as London's final struggle to reveal to his often dense and deaf audience the urgency of his socialist cry against the perils of capitalism. The fact is, his earlier stories masterfully carry his socialist argument, in more subtle, complex allegories. Through a Marxist reading of Jack London's short stories, one can discern a systematic argument which begins with his earliest Alaskan story and continues through his final Klondike tale.

According to Raymond Williams, author of *Marxism and Literature*, the basic precept of Marxist literary criticism considers all literature a product of the 'base,' or real, economic structure. The literary product, then, constitutes the 'superstructure,' the intellectual, spiritual aspects of society. The elements of the superstructure--laws, religions, art, educational systems--evolve from the dominant class' control of the base and manipulation of the superstructure. The author as producer is susceptible to the pressures and biases inherent in society, and hence, perhaps even unknowingly, he creates a literary product that mirrors the class tensions and economic inequities of society. Hence, while London's "social unconscious" could be responsible for the presence of Marxist allegory in his earlier works, I am certain that his later tales are a conscious, concerted effort to reveal the horrors of

capitalism. In fact, London often expressed dismay over his readers' inability to decipher the thematic purpose of his literature. In reference to his misinterpreted socialist plea, he said once to a fellow author,

the prophets and seers of all times have been
compelled to sit alone except at such times when
they were stoned or burned at the stake. The world
is mostly bone-headed and nearly all boob. (No
Mentor But Myself 160)

Discussion of what constitutes allegory, and further, its rhetorical purpose, is ongoing and often hotly disputed, especially concerning the move into "modern" allegory. One critic's allegory is another's symbol, while another's metaphor becomes another's synecdoche. I will not attempt to solve the largely semantical ambiguity which surrounds allegory today and will rely upon the broadest sense of the term: a systematic, consistent use of symbols which, when drawn together thematically, present a single, coherent message, transcendent of the stories' literal meanings. In London's stories, the Alaskan environment represents the capitalist realm in which his characters must compete. These characters allegorize the various class positions individuals hold in the system. Their conflicts epitomize the struggle of those who wish to move up the social ladder

from subordinate classes, and the effort of those who hope to maintain their already dominant position in the society.

Allegory always presents an argument. In *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher explains, "Allegory belongs ultimately in the area of epideictic rhetoric, the rhetoric of praise and ceremony, since it is most often used to praise or condemn certain lines of conduct or certain philosophical positions" (121). In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Northrop Frye attempts to defend allegory from disparaging critics who resent having the scope of their commentary limited and "prescribed" by it (90). Allegory, he postulates "is still a structure of images, not of disguised ideas, and commentary has to proceed with it exactly as it does with all literature, trying to see what precepts and examples are suggested by the imagery as a whole" (90).

In his "Tentative Conclusion," Frye discusses literature in its broader context, culture, outlining the critic's cultural role. All societies, he maintains, work from a class structure:

Culture may be employed by a social or intellectual class to increase its prestige; and in general, moral censors, selectors of great traditions, apologist of religious or political causes, aesthetes, radicals, codifiers of great books, and

the like are expressions of class tensions...We soon realize....that the only really consistent moral criticism of this type would be the kind harnessed to an all-around revolutionary philosophy of society, such as we find....in Marxism...[where] the present valuation of culture is in terms of its interim revolutionary effectiveness. (346)

But Frye warns against an ethical criticism that looks only to set up supposedly better standards for the future, "selecting and purging a tradition, and all the artists who don't fit...have to be thrown out" (347). Rather, he says, "The goal of ethical criticism is transvaluation, the ability to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture" (348). While agreeing with Frye, I would also maintain that an artist often strives to unveil how culture, a superstructural element spun from the base of society, can actually limit possibility. Hence, the "infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture" can only follow from the critic's understanding of those limiting cultural elements existing currently in his society. I do not hesitate to "harness" my criticism to Marxism, which itself rose from an analysis of and reaction to capitalism, and should be, ideally, its own cultural criticism. London's vision of the

individual and society in capitalism reveals defeat, and he expects the reader to see and understand what his characters do not, that potential visions will always be obscured by a capitalist base and superstructure. Only after he understands the scope and effect of his "contemporary social values" does the critic have a basis for comparison. Through Marxist allegory, London invites the reader to set up this basis, and the critic's condemnation of certain cultural aspects that Frye fears is done already by the author himself.

If, as I believe, London was indeed conscious of the Marxist argument in his short stories, his political satiric allegory allows him to attack an unjust system without having to expose fully his revolutionary purpose. By presenting his argument through allegorical subterfuge, he makes it possible to sell his tales to his largely capitalist readers. Moreover, he protects himself politically, as many writers have, by disguising his true purpose. London's active and lifelong involvement in the Socialist Party gives further support to a Marxist interpretation of his many short stories, his Alaskan stories notwithstanding. The brutal Klondike setting provides the backdrop for his argument, and man's struggle to "strike it rich" in this cold Alaskan environment provides the vehicle for allegory: beneath man's struggle

to combat the cruel, harsh elements of nature lies his struggle to compete in a deadly capitalist world. Inevitably, all humans fall prey to the perils of capitalism. His representative characters run the gambit of nationalities, ages, and gender--American, English, Irish, Scottish, Russian, Native, man, woman, child, heathen, brethren.

By the time Jack London turned eighteen years old, comrades hailed him as "The Boy Socialist." The course of his personal and literary life was set by the Socialist doctrine he embraced as a young man, sending him on a crusade which ultimately led to his self-destruction at forty (Phoner 7-143). London's stories mirror his development as a man and socialist. He was ardent, at times confused, and finally defeated. Like his character Martin Eden, Jack London had difficulties synthesizing the diverse facets of his drive and personality. As a man and artist, London strove for recognition and success, yet at times he relegated himself to selling slews of half-baked stories to pay the bills--a sort of prostitution he disdained. As a Socialist, he also disdained this prostitution, and further was often unable to reconcile his capitalist drive for success with his basic socialist tenets.

The progression of his socialist argument presented in his allegorical Klondike tales follows the confused path of

London's life, but never wanders far from his sustained socialist conscience. In his early works, London attempts to promote comradeship amid capitalism. He argues for the working people to unite and presents this union as the only guarantee for individual survival. London then moves into a second phase where his allegories demonstrate the limited benefits of comradeship in capitalism. Furthermore, he illustrates the far-reaching catastrophic effects of capitalism's superstructure in these tales through the death of the natives and their Alaskan culture and through the dissolution of human relationships in the midst of a competitive capitalist society. Finally, in the last of his Klondike tales, he admits the inevitable defeat capitalism reaps on the individual and society and suggests revolution. The Klondike serves as a fitting setting for these allegories. The Klondike Rush of 1887 lasted only a year. In return for the constant struggles against the brutal elements, one in twenty prospectors returned with a success story (*The Unabridged Jack London* xi) Yet, hundreds, Jack London and his brother-in-law included, joined in this archetypal capitalist quest, taking tremendous risks for a chance at instant capital gain.

Few readers recognize the Marxist allegory in London's tales, and there exist several possible reasons for this. Some readers resist following the "prescribed" reading,

Frye's terminology for allegorical analysis. For readers altogether unfamiliar with allegorical structure, the allegory must give obvious signals of its presence so that even an "uneducated" reader may perceive and accept the story's transcendent meaning. Moreover, London was a well-versed man, and along with his socialist studies, he was fascinated with the emerging applications of Darwinian studies to society in so-called "social evolution." A naturalist would read these tales as a reflection of the man versus nature theme, seeing the individual as a pawn in his natural and social environment. Thus, many readers assume his nature stories reflect especially his analysis of "the survival of the fittest" theory. Such an interpretation is not wrong, but it leads to only part of the picture London drew. Whether on a literal or figurative level, as a naturalist or Marxist, London rejects the feasibility of individual pursuit. This is why the Klondike serves as an appropriate setting: regardless of the reader's interpretative understanding of the tales, London's characters cannot survive the brutal elements in which he places them alone. By discovering the allegory, the reader sees not only an analysis of man's struggle to survive, but an actual argument against the society in which he is struggling.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY WORKS: COMRADES OF THE COLD

London began his first batch of Klondike tales, collected and published in 1900, under the title *Son of The Wolf*, in 1898, immediately after his return from the Yukon to San Francisco. Throughout these tales, London presents a "code," a necessary set of laws to survive the Klondike. Young, zealous, and thirsting for adventure, London romanticizes the role of comradeship in these earlier tales. He revels in the unity of brave men who venture together in this unknown frozen land, maintaining honor and systematic codes. His call for comradeship dulls the full impact of his socialist argument as he evades deep examination of the system itself but plots dramatically the fate of those who shirk support of comrades. Characters like the Malemute Kid and Sitka Charlie are examples of "code-heroes," keepers, holders, and arbiters of the code they follow and lead others to follow. He presents a clear introduction to his socialist allegory and begins his argument subtly and logically by stressing the importance of comradeship as the sole means of survival. Even a naturalist or literal reader would have to conclude that London's characters cannot survive the frozen Alaskan tundra alone. Furthermore, London's "survival of the fittest" theory pertains to working communities, not individuals. In Marxist terms,

only through the unity of the working people can people hope to meet with success, or at least achieve the bare necessities of life in the competitive realm of society. He presents the fatal results of those who breach this code, but few characters in these earlier works reach the ultimate Marxist realization--capitalism inevitably pits individuals against each other. Codes and comradeship become protective facades which necessarily break down when the basic competition is for survival.

In *Solitary Comrade*, John Hedrick sees this theme arising in the Alaskan tales: "Death is the ultimate equalizer and in this awareness London wrote a handful of stories that imply the need for human solidarity" (48). McClintock also concludes that the Northland is a commonly recognized symbol of death. Yet this interpretation leaves death a broad, unexplored, and unilluminated metaphor. And surely London's tales could just as easily illustrate the conclusion that life in a capitalist realm is also a tragic equalizer. Furthermore, solidarity does not work to prevent death, so much as it does to sustain life. Capitalism, thriving on competition and individual incentive, threatens to sever the communal instinct and response which would otherwise work to ensure a common good. Thus, the reader's comprehension of London's Marxist allegory transmutes the death metaphor onto a more complex plane: the capitalist

drive that turns us all into "gamblers," with our lives--or at least the quality of those lives--the stakes.

In none of his tales does London depict characters "striking it rich," nor does he set plots around actual capital gain. The central conflict is almost always reduced to a matter of mere survival, a theme which becomes even more maudlin and pronounced in his later works, like "Love of Life." The picture of competition for capital gain is secured in man's antithetical methods to endure and overcome finally "the primordial simplicity of the North" (50). In these early works, London encourages comraderie as the sole means of achieving that end.

"The Men of Forty-Mile" delineates the basis of the code and comradeship. Irish, American, Russian, Indian half-breed--these multi-cultural men bind together with strict codes of brotherhood as their only means of survival. Still, the "Men of Forty-Mile, shut in by the long Arctic winter, grew high-stomached with overeating and enforced idleness,...and became irritable" (44). Without a common element to compete against, two long-time comrades fall into competition against each other. The root of their dissension stems from an argument over ice: Lon McFane insists he has witnessed ice coming from the bottom of the river; Beetles considers this nonsense, everyone knowing ice forms from the top down. "Beetles appealed to the circle

about the stove, but the fight was on between himself and Lon McFane" (42), for the remaining comrades refuse to participate in a competition against a brother. The dispute culminates in an armed duel. Their fellow comrades convene quickly to discuss this potentially deadly stand-off. London explains, "Their position was paradoxical...While their rough-hewn, obsolete ethics recognized the individual prerogative of wiping out blow with blow, they could not bear to think of two good comrades, such as Beetles and McFane, meeting in deadly battle" (45). These comrades sense that "individual prerogative" is "obsolete," but still feel an inherent wrong in suppressing it. Marxism sometimes necessitates the suppressing of individual prerogative to insure a common good. This necessity often leaves opponents as well as proponents of Marxism uneasy. London himself once argued, "What the devil! I am first of all a white man and only then a Socialist" in defense of a personal opinion he held that appeared to fellow comrades contrary to their socialist tenets (Foner 59).

The Malemute Kid arrives just in time to dissipate the uneasiness, illuminating the theme that the individual pursuit necessary to capitalism is a game that asks participants to lay down their lives, dignity, and integrity as the stakes. So the Kid takes away the competitive element of the duel and makes it impossible for one

individual to exercise his prerogative over the other: there will be no winner, for whoever kills the one will be hanged immediately following the duel. As the Kid explains to his comrades, "Life's a game and men gamblers. They'll stake their whole pile on one chance in a thousand. Take away that one chance and,--they won't play" (45). Without the motivation of personal gain, individual persistence and competition become a self-defeating mockery. He knows that as gamblers in the Klondike, their chips must fall together. For betting against each other leads obviously to comprehensive defeat. Meanwhile, before knowledge of the Kid's plan, Lon and Beetles "wondered at their comrades" as they make no move to abort their duel; "It seemed more was due them from the men they had been so close with and they felt a vague sense of wrong, rebelling at the thought of so many of their brothers coming out, as on a gala occasion, without one word of protest...." (46-7). The two who have broken the comrade code are hurt, expecting "their brothers" to bring them back to the family. But as Beetles and Lon correctly infer, "It appeared their worth had diminished in the eyes of the community" (47). And it has. Two comrades acting as individuals in pursuit of individual recognition render them useless to the "community." Their "worth" is spent on an individual quest, sacrificing what is good for the whole. Many of his stories in this early collection

stress the allegory of comradeship. London depicts the glory and honor in maintaining solidarity against the environment, and the resultant horror when brother turns against brother. Hence, Lon and Beetle's comrades will not dissolve the community to combat individual strife.

Moreover, the capitalist gamble becomes futile without the prize of individual gain. When the two dissenters understand the Kid's plan, that both individuals will be taken from the community if they insist on dueling, Lon replies, "All the percentage to the house an 'niver a bit to the man that buckin'" (48). London implicitly raises a rhetorical question: what good is a man who is "buckin" to a community attempting to maintain common, self-sustaining standards? The two men recant just as a mad dog enters the camp, and London takes the opportunity to illustrate the deep bonds and importance of comradeship. Lon saves Beetles from the dog's attack, and Beetle, in return shoots the dog as it goes for Lon. The allegory concludes with both lifesaving comrades and the community intact. Had the two fought, the Kid, arbiter and leader of the code, insists he would have kept his word and hung the winner, for he intuitively feels the threat of individual determination to the community. The winner would experience achievement, domination over another individual, without considering the loss in relation to the larger community, himself included.

The first story of the collection, "The White Silence," reveals the uncontrollable elements in existence that serve the bonds of comradeship. Although the Malemute Kid may not perceive the destructive nature of his environment, he knows the tragedy of being without a comrade in it. The Malemute Kid and Mason, "for five years,...facing death by field and flood and famine, had they knitted the bonds of their comradeship" (26). A fluke accident of nature leaves Mason near death when an old pine tree collapses on him, and the Kid must, as the code dictates, put his "comrade" out of his suffering in order to salvage his life and the lives of Mason's wife and unborn child. No extent of comradeship could have prevented the accident, illustrating the brute fact that the unity of men does not always protect individuals from this brutal environment. The competition these characters face is not man against nature, rather man against his desire to overcome and capitalize nature.

London's naturalist style is the perfect guise for his socialist plea as his point is illustrated on both the literal and figurative level. On the literal, naturalist plane, there is often no amount of protection capable of warding off the dangers of the harsh Alaskan environment. With or without comrades, many natural dangers are insurmountable. Figuratively, the system itself is so brutal, not even unity can stand against, it. In his later

stories, London goes so far as to illustrate the fact that capitalism even necessitates undermining comraderie and unity. Hence, the Kid must wait for Mason's death, hoping it will not have to be his hand that ends their united force. "It is not pleasant to be alone with painful thoughts in the White Silence," the Kid reflects, for "the bright White Silence, clear and cold, under steely skies, is pitiless" (27). London's diction, "cold," "steely," and "pitiless," moves toward the familiar working world of his readers' capitalist realm, and his socialist argument coalesces here. The Kid is no more "alone" than he has always been in this White Silence, and the White Silence is "pitiless" with or without comrades. Just as he moves to kill his comrade, "The White Silence seemed to sneer and a great fear came upon him" (27). The White Silence sneers at the demise of the partnership, and again at the Kid himself whose fate, despite his undying belief in the strength of unity, lies "pitilessly" before him, a fate which the Kid rightfully "fears."

Still, London continues to promote comraderie with "In a Far Country," perhaps his most brutal example of individual determination precipitating fatal results. In the opening paragraphs, London cautions that it is not death, but man's inability "in learning properly to shape his mind's attitude toward all things, and especially his

fellow man" (50) that one need fear. Death simply becomes the ultimate consequence and realization of this fear. "For the courtesies of ordinary life, he must substitute unselfishness, forbearance, and tolerance," London preaches. "Thus, and thus only, can he gain that pearl of great price--true comradeship" for without this, "he will surely die" (50) London prophesies. Critics like McClintock and Hedrick, who rush to define death as the pivotal metaphor and set it in a fixed position, overlook death's broader ramifications--the inevitable end of capitalist competition.

Carter Weatherbee, an archetypal representative of the lower class, has "no romance in his nature--the bondage of commerce had crushed all that; he was simply tired of the ceaseless grind, and wished to risk great hazards in view of corresponding returns" (50). Broken down by the grinding monotony of the regulated capitalist world, he ventures forth in a world of unsullied capitalist risk--taking, where he is allowed to lay down his life as a stake to strike it rich. London explicitly leads the reader to understand that while life subjected to the "ceaseless grind" of capitalism may yield survival, it negates value. Hence, Weatherbee willingly risks this life. He is not on a Jungian search for self; he is on a capitalist search for gold, hoping to redefine his perhaps unromantic, but at least under working-class self. London allows the reader no time to consider

the prospect of redefinition, of attaining a new position in the firmly established capitalist class system. The far-fetched quest itself foreshadows defeat.

London depicts the other pole of the social strata through the well-to-do Percy Cuthfert who "had no reason to embark on such a venture---...save that he suffered from an abnormal development of sentimental." This sort of ennui which plagues the upper-classes leads Cuthfert to sacrifice his life, as "he mistook this for the true spirit of romance and adventure" (51). He willingly pays for "romance and adventure," which is perhaps an even baser capitalist venture than the unromantic Weatherbee's longing for instant upward mobility. For life on the upper end of capitalism loses meaning when the aspects of nonmaterial life--such as "romance and adventure," which should be marks of individual integrity, drive, and motivation--are reduced to purchasable commodities. One is then seeking identity by attempting to purchase an unnecessary, romanticized form of competition without boundaries, laws or limits.

Existing in "civilized" capitalism, one with the dominant population's controlled base and enforced superstructure, Carter Weatherbee does not rise up, kill or dominate the upper-class oppressor. Nor does Percy Cuthfert strangle or exploit to the death this "filthy, uncultured brute, whose place is in the muck with the swine" (56). In

this unbridled realm of capitalism, the Klondike, what would otherwise be a slow, mutual, covert destruction, becomes a literal competition to the death. Joan Hedrick in *Solitary Comrade* explains, "they perceive each other through class stereotypes, and the mechanical nature of their togetherness is like the articulation of classes and occupations in a capitalist society in which physical interdependence of parts is accompanied by emotional anomie" (52-53).

London juxtaposes the two representative classes next to a multi-class, multi-cultural group of comrades, headed by Jacques Baptiste, "born of a Chippewa woman and a renegade voyager" (51). The two men complain, eat more, but do less, than their share, and "they thought nobody noticed, but their comrades swore under their breaths and grew to hate them" (52). And their comrades cheer when Cuthfert and Weatherbee refuse to continue the quest, deciding to settle the winter in an abandoned cabin. These united comrades foretell Cuthfert and Weatherbee's fate. A comrade divulges to Jacques Baptiste, 'Well, my friend and good comrade, the Kilkenny cats fought till nether hide nor hair, nor yow, was left. You understand?' (55).

"London," McClintock believes, "means to portray what happens when two men face the unknown without the code" (89). An obvious paradox arises in his Jungian interpretation, for how can one follow, let alone create, a

code to the "unknown," and is death indeed a metaphor for this archetypal quest into the unknown? McClintock, apparently recognizing this paradox, responds to this tacit query by maintaining that the code has a limited function in the unknown and what appears as a "deficient man...is really the best he can be, a limited man" (89). By rooting these unattached everyman symbols in a comprehensive Marxist argument, London's tales are able to support a far more tangible and urgent meaning. The code of comradeship is reduced to one of everyone-for-himself in the unknown. While it is true that everyone must face death alone, London's tales illustrate more specifically that one cannot face life alone; a system that encourages one to do so does not drive the individual to the "unknown," it pulls the person into a sort of free-for-all that makes living by any code contrary to survival. People's limitations are the result of the mandatory competitive elements inherent to capitalism. Thus, London's allegory portrays the capitalist system as limited, not necessarily the people within it. Cuthfert and Weatherbee exist by the long established codes embedded in capitalism's superstructure, and this alone effects their tragic end.

The two men are left alone to face the winter, and while the knit bond of comrades made them "conscious of the brutal responsibility" necessary for survival, they still

"strove to out do each other" (55), not assure each other's mutually dependent survival. Eventually, the nature of their competitive codes steers them to a trivial material dispute, and the "first words they had were over the sugar." London remarks glibly, "and it is a really serious thing when two men, wholly dependent upon each other for company, begin to quarrel" (55). For survival depends upon those ties that bond together diverse backgrounds with a common humanity. The capitalist superstructure forges no such bond for Weatherbee and Cuthfert. One sees the other as a pontificating cad, and the other as low-class swill. They refuse to meet on any common ground, the roots of their mutual animosity established generations before them. So alienated are they from each other's realm that they both wonder "how God had ever come to create the other" (56). This denial of their common humanity leads each man to his own destruction. With survival tangent on mutual trust, they cling to "mutual fear..." until "the slightest movement on the part of one was sufficient to arouse the other, and many a still watch their gazes countered as they shook beneath their blankets with fingers on trigger-guards" (60). They become so alienated from one another that at one point, upon chance meeting while foraging for wood, they do not recognize each other and run "shrieking with terror" (60).

Their lack of respect for each other turns inward and the two individuals lose respect for themselves, having "lost all regard for personal appearance, and for that matter, common decency" (57). Physical decay couples with emotional decay, and both men are beset with haunting thoughts, both figurative and literal. Ghosts who moan of past suffering haunt Weatherbee, and Cuthfert is dumbfounded by the "Universes dead and cold and dark, and he its only citizen" (59). While death is the predominant image, the allegorical theme demands that the reader explore the cause of destruction. Cuthfert's revelation embodies London's argument. Cuthfert is "emasculated by the sense of his own insignificance, crushed by the passive mastery of the slumbering ages" (59). Allegorically, Cuthfert unveils the effects of capitalism, which mandate we stand as a lone "citizen" in the market. Unable to compete alone, he is "insignificant" and "crushed" in the capitalist world. Capitalism's "passive master," London argues, perpetuates a concept of individuality based on competitive abilities: the individual is "crushed," the capitalist beast "slumbering" on. As both men lose their identity, "they lost all semblance of humanity, taking on the appearance of wild beasts, hunted and desperate" (60). As such, both seek mastery through each other's decay. When Cuthfert returns from a deluded "quest" for life in the woods with

frostbitten feet, "Weatherbee grinned malevolently, but made no offer to help" (59).

The two men fall into an ugly chasm of capitalism, so that rather than competing to "gain," they compete to destroy. The presence of the irrational in this story predominates, and while this would seem to lend itself to psychological analysis, a Marxist approach provides a solid basis for London's argument by way of political allegory.¹ The concept of 'rationality' constitutes a basic distinction between western capitalist thought and Marxist ideology. In "Rationality and Market Failure," Andrew Schotter delineates the function of rationality in a free market economy. Supposedly, capitalism advances pure individualism by allowing one the expression of profit making. Profit making, or capitalism, is justified by this belief: if two parties enter into agreement willingly, it must be in both of their best interests. The two parties are able to better their quality of life through these "rational" agreements (47-64). But "In a Far Country" echoes Engel's prophesy-- "For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed" (The Marx-Engels Reader 271).

¹My sincere thanks to Stacey L. Joliffe, graduate of Urban Planning, who shared with me her extensive and insightful knowledge of socialist and Marxist precepts.

A brief moment of sun bonds the men with far-fetched illusions of hope shortly before their inescapable destruction. "But," London asserts, "the promise was destined to remain unfulfilled. The Northland is the Northland, and men work out their souls by strange rules" (62). Hence, their temporary bond is shorn when 'reality' demands competition. When Weatherbee discovers a portion of his sugar filched by the enemy, his ghosts lead him to revenge. Fulfilling his last capitalist task, "there was neither pity nor passion, but rather the patient, stolid look of one who has certain work to do and goes about it methodically" (62). Cuthfert meets the axe to his spine with a gunshot to Weatherbee's face. Even in the last vestiges of death the competition continues, with Weatherbee "clutching Cuthfert by the throat with feeble fingers," and Cuthfert sliding "a hand up the clerk's belt to the sheath-knife." London comments glumly on this skewed comradeship, "and they drew very close that last cinch" (63). Cuthfert's dying consciousness speculates, "If Gabriel ever broke the silence of the North, they would stand together, hand in hand, before the great White Throne. And God would judge them! God would judge them!" (64). Unarguably, with a figurative reading, Jack London already has. May they fare better God.

CHAPTER TWO

BREAKING THE ICE

London's argument for comradeship in his first collection, *Son of The Wolf*, sets the groundwork for his mounting allegorical argument against capitalism in his succeeding collections, *The God of His Fathers* and *Children of the Frost*, published in 1901 and 1902 respectively. London broadens the scope of his rhetorical argument in this next phase, and even the later stories of his first collection move beyond his simple cry for comradeship. Through his allegory, London begins examining capitalism's superstructure by focusing on his characters' relationships, values, and social institutions. Comradeship may assure survival within the base, but London argues that there is no protection against the daily assault of the superstructure. The capitalist base generates a competitive, vacuous cycle of superstructural elements--desires, laws, values, justice, religion--which suck in willing individuals only to generate broken spirits, deluded senses of achievement, and, ultimately, destruction of both the individual and his society. This development leads London to his final indictment of capitalism in his later stories; nameless individuals, both oppressor and oppressed, cling to the capitalist code as the only way to establish an identity, unaware that one has already been created and usurped by the system. So tragic is his vision that London looks not for

minor alterations, or united fronts. He calls now for revolution. In these middle works, then, he takes the reader through an examination of the system and its effects on society and the individual that should lead his readers to this conclusion.

It is difficult to call "The Great Interrogation" an allegory, for London conveys quite literally the ugly effects capitalism has on relationships. In "The Great Interrogation," the rich widow of Colonel Sayther searches Alaska for a long lost love. Her husband was the incarnation of a capitalist, and "people spoke awesomely of his deals and manipulations; for he was known down in the States as a great mining man, and as even a greater one in London" (151). She tells no one what she searches for, and "Why his widow, of all women, should have come into the country, was the great interrogation," London says. But clearly the great interrogation comes when she finally meets her lover, certain he will come away with her immediately. But he will not go, choosing to stay coupled with the native woman he has taken as his wife.

She begs him to remember his promise to her, and this begins the great interrogation. Had she not been the one to give up their love to marry for money? She insists that she had no choice: "Pressure--money matters--want my people--trouble" (157). Dave, her lover, is disgusted and echoes

London's argument, that we allow capitalist success to be the sole measure of worth, then set up social institutions that will uphold this, and finally, forego the solidarity of sustaining relationships that insure a common welfare.

Dave's response fairly well sums up London's general indictment of capitalism when he discusses the now deceased Colonel:

He had a narrow wit and excellent judgment of the viler parts, whereby he transferred this man's money to his pockets, and that man's money, and the next man. And the law smiled. In that it did not condemn, our Christian ethics approved. By social measure he was not a bad man. (158)

And he loathes whatever capitalist drive would send his love to the Colonel, for "What was he?" Dave demands, "A great gross material creature, deaf to song, blind to beauty, dead to spirit. He was fat with laziness, and flabby-cheeked...."

In short, Dave refuses to leave with her, and points to Winapie, his native wife. Obviously, Mrs. Sayther does not understand his disgust with her capitalist ways and continues to prompt him though capitalist persuasion. Of the marriage, "it is only a marriage of the country--not a real marriage" (159). And besides, she offers to pay the woman off with a lifetime of credit at the P.C.C. Company.

Finally, she attempts to pay for his love, exclaiming, "Come, Dave, come. I have for both. The way is soft." At this moment, he hears Winapie stifling a dog fight, and he flashes on a scene of Winapie risking her life to save him from an attacking bear. He chooses to endure the hard way for a woman who will not exchange his love for a fur coat.

The horrors of capitalism are so startling to the native population in "Nam-Bok the Unveracious," a comical tale in his third collection, *Children of the Frost*, that when the assumed dead Nam-Bok returns from the sea after several years with tales of the capitalist world, he is the next day sent back to the sea. He speaks of ships, fences, money, and how he and the white men "hunted the fur seal and I marveled much, for always did they fling the meat and the fat away and save only the skin" (292). His brothers do not marvel at this, however; in fact, quite the opposite, they recognize the ignorance of this capitalist practice, and "Opee-Kawn's mouth was twitching violently, and he was about to make denunciation of such waste when Koogah kicked him to be still" (292). Nam-Bok's last mistake is telling the people of an "iron monster" which "vomited smoke." He eventually pays money to ride the "iron monster," and inadvertently plows down an entire village. Nam-Bok takes a few moments to reflect on his capitalist experience, thinking of "a combined harvester, and of the machines

wherein visions of living men were to be seen, and of the machines from which came the voices of men, and he knew his people could never understand" (295). His people know instinctually the evil inherent in the industrialized capitalist world he describes, and they rouse him early in the morning, making haste to explain their urgency. Opee-Kwan explains, 'thou art a fearful and most wonderful liar; if thou art the shadow of Nam-Bok, then though speakest of shadows, concerning which is not good that living men have knowledge. This great village thou has spoken of we deem the village of shadows" (297), and they send him hence.

Again, London's point is made just as easily on a literal level in this tale. Perhaps there is such a world, but even "knowledge" of the capitalist world is dangerous, and they remove the threat he poses to their way of life. Even his mother rejects him and his new ways as he pleads for her to come where "there are fish and oil in plenty. There the frost comes not, and life is easy, and the things of iron do the work of men" (297). She responds, "son I shall pass down among the shadows. But I have no wish to go before my time...and I am afraid" (298), as, London would argue, we all should be. Nam-Bok would have responded similarly had he been the unexposed native meeting a man from over the sea. Yet, in only a short time, Nam-Bok had become satisfied and complacent with the new world he was

exposed to, and fails, like many of London's capitalist readers, to see the evils that his people do.

In "God of His Fathers," London describes the invading onslaught of capitalism directly: "already, over the unknown trails and chartless wilderness, were the harbingers of steel,--fair-faced, blue-eyed, indomitable men, incarnations of the unrest of their race" (137). He surely describes the majority of his readers, Anglo-Saxon lads, destined to take up the toil, the unrest, without question. He explains, "So many an unsung wanderer fought his last and died under the cold fire of the aurora, as did his brothers in burning sands and reeking jungles, and as they shall continue to do till in the fullness of time the destiny of their race be achieved" (138). Although McClintock argues that London uses "race identification" as an optimistic front for comradeship, I find it difficult to understand how McClintock perceives London as drawing optimism from such a destiny which, even on a literal level, London leaves ambiguous. By this ambiguity, London tries to force his readers to question (though apparently this did not always happen) what, exactly, will be "achieved," and more crucial to his argument, at what expense will the means justify the end of this destiny? Figuratively, London offers his answers, persuading his readers to see the true picture of their capitalist society.

Half-breed Baptiste the Red, whose mother was the daughter of a chief and father was a "British bred...gentleman's son," refuses to allow a group of explorers to continue into their native lands. He would ask that they denounce their Christian god, but since they are the first offenders, he will simply allow them to return whence they came. Baptiste explains how the church refused to marry him to a white woman, and how, in escaping with his love, he had to shoot down the father. Finally, he explains how his young daughter was raped by the Chief Factor of a supply store whom the town minister harbored and protected. Still, Baptiste sent the factor "before his god, which is a bad god, and the god of white men" (140). Baptiste the Red is himself half white, but as a minority, he suffered at the hands of the dominating white class. And really, it is not the church directly that prevents his marriage; it is her father, "a big man among his people," who "said the girl knew not her own mind, and talked over much with her and became wroth that such things should be" (139). The church merely sanctions the ruling-classes' prejudice. And while neither did the church rape his daughter, it did protect her assailant from the justice that surely would have come to Baptiste in a similar situation.

Essentially, London details the Marxist argument against religion, the "opiate of the masses." First, it

keeps the masses complacent and accepting of their places in society with the promise of something better in the afterlife. Moreover, religious institutions tend to align themselves with the power structures in society, thereby promoting and sanctioning the dominant population's manipulation of the base and superstructure. What Baptiste fears is his destruction through the capitalist elements from which he has previously fled. He foretells the imperialist move into his land intuiting the church's connection with this. He tells Hay Stockard, "If we permit you to sit by our fires, after you will come your church, your priests, and your gods," to which Stockard responds, "I am not responsible for my brothers" (141). But Baptiste has already seen the destructive connection between men like Stockard and the elements of his society that he brings with him, and rejoins, "Your brothers are many, and it is you and yours who break the trail for them to follow. In time they shall come to possess the land, but not in my time" (141).

Unlike his previous stories that use the Northland as the allegorical setting for capitalism, London narrows the scope of his examination to an institution within that realm. Generated from a capitalist base, prejudice and injustice abound in this superstructural element, the church. Even the heathen, Hay Stockard, respects the church's function--to maintain and sanction the ruling class' status-

-and sacrifices his life for it. I disagree with the conclusion that he does this to promote the greatness of his race as some critics explain; he is merely securing the dominance of it. He himself is "married" to a native woman who bore him a son, obviously contrary to the perpetuation of a pure race. As for the religion itself, he has no use for it, save as a free sort of insurance for his woman and child, marrying her and baptizing them both just before battle. He explains to his friend, "if the woman and the kid cross the divide tonight they might as well be prepared for potluck. A long shot, Bill, between ourselves, but nothing lost if it misses" (148). Religion becomes a no-fail, long-shot business investment.

London consistently brings the reader back to the original questions: what is the source of this "unrest?," what destiny are we headed for?, what do we leave our brothers? The reader discovers the driving force behind Stockard's "unrest":

"Somewhere up there, if the dying words of a shipwrecked sailorman who had made the fearful overland journey were to be believed, and if the vial of golden grains in his pouch attested to anything,--somewhere up there, in the home of winter stood the Treasure House of the North." (142)

Tragic irony abounds in Stockard's dismay over the chance of

losing this opportunity to reach his destiny. He gets his tip from a man who died trying to strike it rich, and responds by risking several lives, his wife and child's included, to reach the "Treasure House of the North" (143). Moreover, he curses that "as keeper of the gate, Baptiste the Red, English half-breed and renegade, barred the way" and does not understand Baptiste's objection to this capitalist intrusion upon his people and their land. Clearly, Hay Stockard merely adds one more to the dutiful, fulfilling the "destiny of his race," with the blessings of society's most revered institution, the church.

Stockard has not much time to muse over his dilemma with the arrival of Sturges Owen, an overzealous, weak-spirited missionary who comes down the river aided by his two Indian converts. The humor through these passages--the two explorers desperately trying to shut the preacher up and send him on his way as he throws curses at Stockard's heathen life--is not sustaining and renders the proceeding bloodshed even more horrifying. Owens remains steadfast in his mission, and Baptiste demands they relinquish him to his authority. Stockard responds, "My heart was clean of evil...Along comes this here priest as you call him...He'd have come whether I was here or not. But now that he is here, being of my people, I've got to stand by him" (145), and he speaks the truth. He adheres to the capitalist

tenets of his society where exploiting native territories for gain is brave, noble, and progressive, everything contrary to evil. And imperialist growth would bring its missionaries, its sanctioning body, with or without the move of a single individual. Hay Stockard assumes erroneously, however, that by upholding these codes he can forge an identity for himself.

In the end, all of the intruders, save Hay Stockard who has bravely held his own and Sturges Owen who has hidden from danger, are slain at the hands of Baptiste the Red and his people. Sturges' Christian facade crumbles when the competition turns to his bodily survival, and to spare his life, he denounces his God before the half-breed. Stockard laughs at the missionary, whose presence has caused the deaths of his wife, child, and friends; the reader of the figurative text laughs at Hay Stockard. In Stockard's apparent heroism and prideful brotherhood (class-consciousness, really), rests the outcome of London's examination where heroism becomes ignorance and brotherhood a prostituted capitalist tool. The surge of pride a literal reader may feel from Stockard's refusal to deny a God he has in the past rejected, turns to disgust on an allegorical level. He has a God: "Ay, the God of my fathers" (150), he says while one of His representatives, Sturges Owen, is safely on his way down the river by now. London forces the

reader to question the validity of this God, and even more, I think, of the "fathers" who have perpetuated and sanctioned a system of competitive battle and led their generations of sons to death and destruction. Hay Stockard is not the martyr of his race or even its values--he is one more ignorant fool who believed implicitly in the capitalist code. He had to give his life for it, not understanding that he had done that long ago, like his father before him.

Many of London's tales present the imperialist forces of capitalism. The capitalists in the Klondike impose their own self-gratifying codes, laws, and values on the native populations. Tragic results ensue, and not surprisingly, capitalism's superstructure sinks into a moral cesspool of competitive codes. Critics assume these tales follow London's social Darwinian depiction of race distinction, survival, and domination. Furthermore, McClintock explains, "Having found individual identity impossible to integrate, London turns to race identification, a blood brotherhood, in 'The God of His Fathers' and, thereby returns to the theme of mastery. His pessimism is held in temporary abeyance" (97). However, on a figurative, and I hasten to add even on a literal, level, stories such as "Nam-Bok the Unveracious," "The Great Interrogation," and "God of his Fathers" hardly seem optimistic, and furthermore, flatly reject McClintock's assertion that London looks to "Group Identification for

sustaining humanly meaningful values" (98): the missionary in "God of His Fathers," over whom the blood battle is fought, denies his religion, supposedly the tantamount "humanly meaningful" value, to spare his own life. Hence, London portrays how individuals of the dominant population lose control of their superstructure amid the pressures of capitalist competition, destroying themselves and the subordinate societies they attempt to exploit.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FINAL FREEZE

London's socialist argument culminates in his later Alaskan tales, *The Faith of Men* and in several uncollected stories, creating a grim collage of the ravages of capitalism. The solidarity of men is broken--many characters now go it alone. The Malemute Kid and Sitka Charlie philosophy of comraderie is left to the naive and optimistic. In many of these later tales, London personifies the sled dogs, thus alerting the reader to his allegorical intentions. The dogs are a dramatic addition to London's allegorical argument, representing the oppressed proletariat, sustaining brutality in exchange for survival. Specifically, the dogs represent what Marx referred to as the "lumpenproleteriat," a class of citizens so impoverished and oppressed that they adhere to no laws and forge no alliances. They seek merely survival and will undermine their own to that end (Hedrick 5). Likewise, there exists no bond between the men, who represent the dominant classes, and their dogs, save the bond of mutual animosity and dependence upon each other for survival. When given the opportunity, the dogs, figures of the oppressed, rise up against the ruling class. Conversely, the oppressor sacrifices the life of his worker when necessary to assure his own survival. One can discern the further development

of this allegorical theme working as well in his larger Alaskan works, *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*.

Unlike Buck's submission to exploitation in *The Call of the Wild*, Batard, the bastard "devil" dog in London's tale "Batard," spends his life in revolt against his oppressor, ultimately overtaking him. The competition between dog and owner, Black Leclere, begins with their first meeting when "Batard had buried his puppy fangs in Leclere's hand, and Leclere, thumb and finger, was coolly choking his young life out of him" (627). Although the dog is given to "foolish rebellion" in his younger years, he learns to endure the abuse, "so that he became grim and taciturn, quick to strike, slow to warn" (628) while waiting patiently for the day of his revolt. As oppressor, Leclere "was bent on the coming of the day when Batard should wilt in spirit and cringe and whimper at his feet." Allegorically, London presents the classic Marxist picture of class tension and struggles. The dog, representing the oppressed lumpenproletariat, refuses to give his superior and tormentor the satisfaction of seeing him suffer, and "this unconquerable but fanned Leclere's wrath and stirred him to greater deviltries" (628). Leclere remains intent on exerting his power and superior position over Batard, using a variety of ploys to bring the dog to submission. He feeds him less than the other dogs and praises those who are "not

half the worker he was." Yet he is unable to bend the dog to his will. Typical of one of the lumpenproletariat, Batard responds to these abuses by exercising the same domination over his fellow dogs, stealing food from his own brothers, and fighting with those whom Leclere praises.

Batard's and Leclere's animosity mounts, until, finally, Batard attacks the man in his sleep, and the two battle until near death. Meanwhile, Batard's "teammates" look on, waiting for him to be dinner. London thus foreshadows the final end of capitalism, where no loyalties exist, solidarity impossible. Even the most oppressed, like Batard and the other dogs, turn on one other rather than forming allegiances to take over their mutual oppressor. Both lie near death at the end of the fight, and Leclere pulls himself on top of Batard to protect him from being devoured by the other wolves (631-2). Leclere later explains to inquirers that he refused to see this competition end with the reward going to another. Moreover, Leclere's ultimate goal is not to kill Batard bodily, but to bend him to submission emotionally and spiritually. The competition continues; eventually both heal and resume active animosity.

Through a series of events, Leclere is falsely accused of killing a man. Moments before he is to hang, a messenger arrives with information regarding Leclere's mistaken

identity as the murderer. The executioners leave to hang the right man, but keep Leclere in his noose for a bit to "meditate on [his] sins and the ways of providence."

Batard, after years of silent rebellion, seizes his opportunity. He heaves his body at the box beneath Leclere, hanging his oppressor, satiated in his just revenge.

"Batard" is by far London's most dramatic depiction of the class struggle. Few of his other characters move to such outright rebellion; instead, the reader usually sees the destructive forces of capitalism in more subtle forms, such as a comrade pitted against comrade in a competition for survival, a motif which begins the tale "Love of Life."

In "Love of Life," two men sporting sacks of gold make their way home after an apparently successful expedition. Bill deserts his nameless partner, leaving him stranded in the middle of an icy cold river with a sprained ankle. The "man watched him go, and though his face was expressionless as ever, his eyes were like the eyes of a wounded deer" (741). From here, the tale winds through the nameless man's struggle to survive. His love of life, despite its mocking misery and meaningless purpose in the constant competition for survival, remains unflagging. Daily, the man becomes more grotesque, limping on stumps of blood, crawling endlessly after wounded birds for food--the basis for survival stripped to its most essential elements. Finally,

he must relinquish the gold dust of his dreams for status and identity as the weight of the sack is too much for him to endure. London asserts that life first consists of assuring the essential welfare for all; attempts at individual capital gain are always contrary to this end. At one point, the nameless man comes across the bones and gold of his former partner. "Well, Bill had deserted him; but he would not take the gold, nor would he suck on Bill's bones. Bill would have, though, had it been the other way around" (755). Certainly Bill would have, and so, too, should the nameless struggler. It would have been the literal embodiment of two competitors sucking the life out of each other, neither experiencing gain or domination, only a parasitic survival. Moreover, he could not even bear the weight of his own "achievement," so, of course, he will not take Bill's gold. Gold is no longer a sustaining path to identity: food, water, and shelter are.

Shortly after discovering Bill's remains, the man sees a ship on the horizon and begins to make his way, frantic for food. Following him now is a sick wolf, waiting for the man to die. London comments, "then began as grim a tragedy of existence as was ever played--a sick man that crawled, a sick wolf that limped, two creatures dragging their dying carcasses across the desolation and hungry each other's lives" (755). The rhetorical horror of his allegory is even

more grim--this is the demise of the capitalist world, the oppressed figure of the wolf now an equal to the once dominant class, fallen by his own hand in the game. There remains nothing left to exploit, and each class competes for what little life remains in the other. The quality of life is so debased that even the man, catching his reflection in a pool of water, is horrified. At times, he is given to questioning the validity of life, "But he did not moralize long," continuing this senseless competition. Finally, the two competitors lie side by side, "fighting off unconsciousness and waiting for the thing that was to feed upon him and upon which he wished to feed." The man eventually sinks his teeth into the wolf's neck, and sucks its life's blood. Figuratively, he acts as his society has all along mandated and promoted through subterfuge, an act which London now portrays graphically on a literal level.

This final primal competitive act strips the man of his identity. By the time the man reaches the ship, London no longer refers to man, rather an "it": "It was blind, unconscious. It squirmed on the ground like some monstrous worm" (757). His attempt to compete in the capitalist frontier has not been rewarded with a higher status; indeed, the competition removes him so far from this goal that he is no longer even a member of the society in which he competes. In this sense, he has been blind all along to the tragic

capitalist end London foreshadows. The sailors take him in and sail off for San Francisco, and though the ship's scientists hail the man as "sane," none can help but notice his lust for food, and although "They limited the man at his meals, but still his girth increased and his body swelled prodigiously under his shirt" (758). For now the man understands his capitalist world on a much baser level, where the essentials of survival are what distinguish one from another. The sailors toss him leftovers which "he clutched avariciously, looked at it as a miser looks at gold, and thrust it into his shirt bosom," and his bunk is lined with spare food. "Yet he was sane," the scientists said, "He was taking precautions against another possible famine--that was all." And that is all; he prepares himself to take up the competition that inevitably awaits for him in San Francisco, where it is said he recovers.

London continues this depiction of primal competition for survival in "To Build a Fire."¹ "To Build a Fire" is probably Jack London's most well know and widely read story, the bane of high school reading where students discuss London as a stark naturalist--the man versus nature theme--and ponder his raw, simplistic view of life. But read

¹My unflagging gratitude to Dr. Kenneth L. Mitchell of Cal State University, Fullerton who, over a year ago, brought to my attention the Marxist allegory present in this story; herein lies the impetus for this entire endeavor, during which Dr. Mitchell continually gave his greatly appreciated support and insight.

through a Marxist interpretation, "To Build a Fire" is anything but simplistic. The story becomes a complex allegorical argument conveying the constant tension between the oppressed and the oppressor in competition to survive their brutal society. That London never names "the man" in the story indicates his intangible force as oppressor. "The man's" brutal environment, "cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray" (417), colors the oppressive atmosphere which he has entered willingly in hopes of capital gain. In fact, he is so familiar with the "intangible pall over the face of things" that "this fact did not worry the man"; he is not concerned with the nature of oppression, but instead with his own position in such an atmosphere. London furthers this point, exclaiming, "but all this--the mysterious far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all--made no impression on the man" (417). As he climbs the capitalist "trail," he concentrates solely on his own individual status and remains oblivious to the harsh obstacles inherent in the endless capitalist quest.

London immediately characterizes the man as entirely unphilosophical: "he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life but only in things, and not in significances." The capitalist connotations abound: the capitalist understands material competition and accumulation

until he finally comes to substitute the "significances" of life--humanity, spirituality--with "things." London takes many opportunities to discuss the "significances" that the man, both oppressed and oppressor, ignores:

It did not lead him to mediate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. (417)

London makes it clear that under capitalism all classes suffer and all must question the validity of its base and superstructure. Because his unenlightened protagonist does not, London forces the reader to question. It is fifty degrees below zero, "that there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his mind." He never considers that he should be able to exist in a less hostile society, but accepts the competition necessary for mere survival, ignorantly believing he can achieve status besides. The man has left his fellow loggers, "the boys" already at camp, to pursue a personal capitalist venture: "he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting logs in the spring from the Islands in the Yukon" (418). He is so engrossed in this venture that little else matters to him, and, although he realizes

his situation is worsening, "the temperature did not matter," for he accepts this "temperature" as part of his struggle.

Once again, as seen in "Batard" and "Love of Life," the introduction of the dog alerts the reader to London's allegorical intentions. The dog is personified, projecting emotion and assessing the situation at hand--in short, a much more "imaginative" beast than the man. The dog is the archetypal oppressed figure, the faceless cog of the proletariat--a domesticated wild beast, "gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf" (418). Being the oppressed in an oppressive society, the dog, beast though he may be, immediately recognizes the direness of the situation, and London comments, "the animal was depressed...." Unlike the man, a member of the ruling class whose primary goal is profit, the worker's instinctual goal is survival which the dog knows is in jeopardy: "the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels..." (418). While the dog senses that the man causes his "menacing apprehension," he does not rise up against him, but "slinks" reluctantly along behind the man; his subservient position is established, and the means to change this position unknown to the dog.

The man's ignorance of the position he puts himself in continues with the venture, creating a myriad of tangential problems which the man also dismisses. Although the juice from his chewing tobacco creates a cumbersome crystallized beard around his mouth, the man, as a true capitalist, simply resigns himself to the fact that "it was the penalty all tobacco chewers paid in that country..." (418), opting for material gratification over sensibility. And London constantly reminds the reader that "[he] was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about" (419), except, of course, the desired ultimate end of all this suffering--individual capital gain. "Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts," he knows of the "traps" in his society, snow covered pools of icy water. Yet, he does not speculate on changing the system, eliminating the traps; instead, "he had shied in panic" at the dangerous undertaking he has entered willingly.

London depicts many instances where the oppressor must exercise his force over the oppressed who, unlike the man, is aware of their impending doom. While the dog displays its reluctance, it continues to submit to the man, dropping "in again at his heels with a tail drooping discouragement" (419). As the dog's reticence grows, the man resorts to physical threats, a common last resort of the ruling class. So, when "suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go in

front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward." London's thesis becomes clear through these passages. The man and dog are no longer only battling their oppressive society, but now are at odds with one another: two opposing classes struggling for survival as the threat of collapse grows on. The man, however, is incapable of such philosophizing. The oppressor's smugness, as he "chuckled at his foolishness" in forgetting to build a fire, foreshadows his own ignorant fatal mistake at the end of the story.

During his expedition, the man reflects briefly upon the prophetic warnings of the "man from Sulphur Creek," who warned him against individual capital pursuit, traveling alone in the cold relentless tundra. Still, at this point the man is just "a bit frightened," realizing that "one must not be too sure of things" (420). The man is apparently an experienced capitalist, and attempts to anticipate competitive blows. But again, he thinks in terms of "things" and not "significances," of the elements in his society which would compel him to undertake such an impossible venture in this cruel atmosphere. Meanwhile, the dog, however much an unwilling participant in this excursion, does not revolt to find his own way back to camp but awaits his wages, "satisfaction in the fire."

London explains the cruel history behind the gruesome class system:

This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point, But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. (420)

Protected, or at least made materially comfortable, by his status, the oppressor, like his ancestors, blindly forages through a dismal unchanging existence, while the under-class, unprotected in the system and fully cognizant of its inherited inferior position, follows reluctantly behind. Neither attempt to change this cruel class system, and, although the dog considers waiting "for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came" (422), he will not attempt to draw the "curtain" himself. He sees that the present system must end, as it will eventually consume itself anyway, but he refuses to affect any change having only an intangible notion of capitalism's infinite nucleus.

The animosity between these two representative classes is the foundation for their relationship, a theme seen in "Batard," "In a Far Country," and several other tales. As is often the case between opposing classes, "there was no

keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was toil slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whiplash and of harsh menacing throat sounds that threatened the whiplash."

London sublimely illustrates the cruel relationship between the worker enduring brutality in exchange for survival and the employer exploiting and threatening his worker in attempts to achieve social status. The common bonds of humanity are replaced with animosity and competition.

When the man falls into one of the many "traps," an icy pool, he does not consider his own responsibility for encouraging and participating in such a system but "was angry, and cursed his luck aloud" (422); however, he does reflect on the "old-timer's" Marxist advice not to undertake such a venture alone. The word "luck" itself tends to have capitalist connotations: success, and sometimes survival, depends on one's "luck" in this society. Yet, when the man successfully builds a fire, he rejects the old man's warning against independent capital gain and asserts proudly, "any man who was a man could travel alone" (423), a common utterance of the ruling class (and our own present government). In his haste for instant gratification, he makes his fatal mistake and builds his fire where convenient, under a snow-laden tree. London delineates carefully the nature of the man's undoing, explaining, "It

was his own fault or, rather, his mistake" (423). He plays the game and knows the rules but ignores them. And while he is not directly at "fault" for the capitalist game, he is accountable for his "mistake" in it. Each pull on the tree creates "an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster" (423). As is often the case, the "imperceptible agitation," those silent but growing tensions ignored by the ruling class, pull down the system in a single collapse. Furthermore, he is the sole cause of this "agitation," and his demise the result. His reaction reflects his base understanding of his undoing--"the man was shocked. It was as though he had heard his own death sentence" (423). The reader, I imagine is not shocked, for London foreshadows the man's death even in the title, and, after the opening descriptions of the man, his situation, and his ignorance of it. Hence, London settles immediately the apparent conflict in the story, man versus nature, and this leads the reader into the figurative conflict, which presents London's argument against capitalism. The man's spontaneous understanding of his imminent death simply exaggerates his desperate struggle to remain a competing member of society.

The dog grasps immediately his oppressor's dying power as the man struggles to light another fire in the open. The dog begins to realize that the man is no longer capable of

providing wages for services rendered as London comments, "and all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire provider, and the fire was slow in coming" (424). The tension and competition between the two culminates in the man's frantic struggle to save himself as he considers the beast's inherent advantage over him and "felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering" (424).

As the man loses control over his environment, so too does he lose control over himself. The final flounderings of the oppressor to build a fire, to survive in his society, are fruitless as "he willed to close them...and the fingers did not obey." Realizing that he will die within this system, his lack of control mounts, extinguishing the flame of his survival when "the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out" (424). The environment which the man has willingly entered for gain becomes his downfall as his power to compete in the system dwindles. Inevitably, such will be the ruin of all in this society, London suggests, and the man himself begins to believe, that "the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right" (424).

Unaccustomed to appreciating the givens in his life, when the man produces flame, "he cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly." But again, "the fire provider had failed" (425), and the dog senses the man's waning ability to supply its wages. "Its suspicious nature" lends itself to "an apprehension of the man" who attempts to coax the dog close enough to him so he can slice it open for warmth: the proverbial stab in the back. The struggle between the classes climaxes as each competes for survival. The fatalism of this atmosphere is obvious as the man's attempts to exert his last vestiges of power over the dog fail. The ruling class may exploit the proletariat for capital gain, but once the competition dwindles to one for mere survival, the class system erodes and it is every man for himself. Certainly, the working class is by far the more fit and accustomed to this sort of competition; before the blind eyes of the upper-class, they practice daily. Nonetheless, the dog still does not revolt or run-off, "but it would not come to the man" (425) now aware of his declining position. And the man soon realizes that although he can keep the dog from exerting its will, he does not have the ability to compete with, and overcome it; "there was no way to do it [stab the dog]" (425). With this realization is the implicit understanding that the man has lost his position in society. He has attempted to distinguish himself through

capital gain, but destroys himself instead, becoming one more nameless victim in the game.

The man's impending death, his failure to capitalize in his society, brings on an acute panic as he runs aimlessly toward his death. In an indubitable understatement, London comments, "his theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked endurance" (427), and the man was doomed from the start without the endurance to compete successfully. Meanwhile, the dog "ran with him at his heels," until the man falls. Then comes the final showdown as the dog "sat in front of him, curiously eager and intent" (427). The dog considers the man's ability to rule over, and more to provide for him, "eager and intent" to move on to one who can. As the dog complacently waits for its fate to be decided, the man berates this inferior beast for its "warmth and security," something he has given up in hopes of future material gain.

Alas, the man succumbs to his fate, deciding to meet "death with dignity," for certainly the preceding competition was anything but dignified. With the final visions before death, he sees himself "with the boys, save and warm," and mumbles to the Marxist guru of Sulphur Creek, "you were right, old hoss; you were right." The dog, still unsure of its autonomy, sits "facing him and waiting" for the dead man to make his next move. Since "there was no

signs of fire," of provisions for survival, the dog considers desertion, expecting to be "chidden by the man" (428). The dog still fears the power the man has over him and remains subservient until he catches "the scent of death." With the oppressor's inability to provide, the oppressed sets off, alone "in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers" (428). The extent of the dog's oppression is depressingly clear in this final statement of the tale. Although the dog has known all along the direction of the camp, it dare not revolt against his master and attempt to make his own way until it concludes that the man can no longer provide or pose as a controlling body over it. Echoing London's own dismay over the Socialist Party's reluctance to rebel actively, the dog, in exchange for survival, will consent to the oppression of yet another (Foner 123).

With a Marxist reading, a simplistic view of life becomes a complex network of opposing forces in a limited harsh society. And this is ultimately London's final point. It is not man so much as it is his capitalist society that is limited, which then limits man's ability to understand the interdependent nature of individual survival and welfare. The dog, concerned with survival alone, not the quality of that survival, does not rebel against the many

injustices wrought upon it. The man's vain attempt to further his social position resounds with London's belief in the futility of individual capital gain. The final comment displays dismally the competition in an unrelenting society, and "man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain limits of heat and cold."

CONCLUSION

NO GETTING THROUGH

Unfortunately, few of London's readers recognized the allegorical significance of his Alaskan tales. London ended his literary career and life much like his autobiographical character, Martin Eden, who laments finally, "It was the bourgeoisie that bought his books and poured its gold into his money-sack, and from what little he knew of the bourgeoisie it was not clear to him how it could possibly appreciate or comprehend what he had written" (*No Mentor But Myself* 192). And yet even with the pronounced socialist message in *Martin Eden*, London critic Philip Foner explains, "what aroused his [London's] anger was that most of the critics, including Socialist reviewers, attacked the novel as an apology for individualism and as proof that London had abandoned his belief in socialism." so discouraged by this, London wrote on the flyleaf of one book,

'Written as an indictment of individualism, it was accepted as an indictment of socialism; written to show that man cannot live for himself alone, it was accepted as a demonstration that individualism made for death.' (Foner 103-4)

In reference to his misinterpreted socialist attempts, London writes to Mary Hunter Austin in 1915, "Long ere this, I know that you have learned that the majority of the people who inhabit the planet Earth are bone-heads. Wherever the

bone of their heads interferes there is no getting through" (*No Mentor But Myself* 159). This said of his larger and literal social works, there is little wonder that his collection of Klondike tales remains in the young reader's adventure canon.

In his essay "What Communities Lose By the Competitive System," London, in graphic literal terms, details the premise for the Marxist allegory present in his short stories. He maintains that "the old indictment that competitive capital is soulless, still holds. Altruism and industrial competition are mutually destructive. They cannot exist together" (Foner 428). All of London's Alaskan tales illustrate this point through allegory. Despite any initial intentions of his protagonists, competition leads them to betrayal, murder, and self-destruction. His stories build up to the "old indictment" of the capitalist world. His earliest Alaskan works, "The White Silence," "The Men of Forty-Mile," and "In a Far Country," call for comradeship amidst competition. As London continued in the fight for socialism, his most active years from 1905-1907, he abandoned this call, realizing it as a naive response to the perils of capitalism. His argument turns away from the individual and toward the competitive society in which he lives. Tales like "The Great Interrogation," and "God of Our Fathers" illustrate the dominant population's

manipulation of society's most sacred superstructural elements--the church and marriage--for material gain. London exposes a society that negates comradeship and promotes competition in its place.

London concludes his essay:

If the measure of individual worth be, *How much have I made?* the present competitive system is the best medium by which to gain that end; but under all its guises it will form a certain type--from the factory hand to the millionaire there will be one stamp of material acquisitiveness. But if the measure be, *What have I made of myself?* it cannot be attained by the present system. The demand of the belly-need is too strong; the friction too great: individuality is repressed, forced to manifest itself in acquisitiveness and selfishness. (Foner 430)

Over and over again, London depicts this sentiment in his Alaskan stories, his later stories especially a ruthless enactment of capitalism stripped to its basest level. In "In a Far Country," Weatherbee and Cuthfert search for "individual worth" in the hunt for gold. Inevitably they must forego individual pride and dignity in order to compete against each other for their lives. In London's later stories, "Love of Life" and "To Build a Fire," his protagonists, nameless and without identity, save the

struggle to survive in an unrelenting environment, illustrate how "individuality is repressed, forced to manifest itself in acquisitiveness and selfishness."

London asserted proudly in his essay "Revolution," "In short, so blind is the capitalist class that it does nothing to lengthen its lease of life, while it does everything to shorten it...The revolution is here, now. Stop it who can" (Foner 504). Yet, after years of misinterpreted socialist pleas and ardent effort for the cause, he felt defeated. Disgusted more with the apathy of his own comrades than the "bone-headed" ignorance of his readers, London resigned from the Oakland Socialist Party shortly before his death in 1916. Cynical, sick, and exhausted from a literary and personal life dedicated to the eradication of capitalism, he writes on March 7,

Dear Comrades:

I am resigning from the Socialist Party, because of its lack of fire and fight and its loss of emphasis upon the class struggle...

My final word is that liberty, freedom and independence are royal things that cannot be presented to nor thrust upon race or class. If races and classes cannot rise up and by their own strength of brain and brawn, wrest from the world liberty, freedom and independence, they never in

time can come to these royal possessions.

(Foner 123)

In November, London died, probably from a deliberate overdose of morphine, with little faith in the brain and brawn of those to whom he sent his socialist message.

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